

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY®

Small Town
Big Miracle

BISHOP W.C. MARTIN
WITH JOHN FORNOF



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Small Town, Big Miracle

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I would like to thank God for the opportunity to present to the world this treasure. I echo the words of King David: “The LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes” (Psalm 118:23). I thank God for my parents, L. M. and Pearline Martin, for teaching me the value of family. I also thank God for my lovely wife, Donna; my children—Terry, Princeton, La’Donna, Joshua, Tyler, Mercedes, and Terri; grandson, No’ah A’Mhad; my sister and nine brothers; Bennett Chapel Church family; and Saving a Generation Ministry.

May God bless and keep you; you are in our prayers.

—Bishop W. C. Martin



I give glory and honor to God for all my many blessings. God has truly been awesome in my life. This book is dedicated in the loving memory of my wonderful parents, L. J. Cartwright and Murtha Lee Grisby Cartwright. Special thanks to my godparents, Bishop and Mother Liz Swindle. Neither this book nor my ministry would have been possible without their love and dedication to our family. It’s because of their deep love for family values and the Word of God that I am the person who I am today. Many blessings and thanks to the entire Cartwright and Grisby families. Your love and support means the world to me. “[I am] confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6).

—Donna Martin

*“And the King will answer and say to them,
‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch
as you did it to one of the least of these
My brethren, you did it to Me.’”*

—MATTHEW 25:40 (NKJV)



Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	1
CHAPTER 1 At the End of the Pavement	3
CHAPTER 2 The First of 72	13
CHAPTER 3 “I’m Your Mama Now”	25
CHAPTER 4 Finally Home	39
CHAPTER 5 “You’ve Got to Be Out of Your Mind” ...	47
CHAPTER 6 A No-Matter-What Perseverance	55
CHAPTER 7 The View from Outside Possum Trot	67
CHAPTER 8 Possum Trot Touches America	75
CHAPTER 9 How?	89
CHAPTER 10 Your Turn for a Miracle	97
CHAPTER 11 Bring the Miracle Home	105
CHAPTER 12 The Beginning of the Road	113
A Call to My Fellow Pastors	131
Appendix: Help for Those Considering Adoption	133

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—Bishop W. C. and Donna Martin



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And most of all, thank You, God, for entrusting us to tell such a special story.

—John Fornof

Introduction

The dark spots on her legs told a story of abuse. The pattern of discoloration on her skin confirmed she had been burned with a cigarette lighter. Reports say she passed out from the pain. She was dumped in a ditch, left to die.

She was three years old. Her name is Terri.

She's my daughter.

To some people, Terri and others like her are considered broken. They were abandoned, abused, and traumatized at an early age. When they're older, they suffer from all kinds of behavior problems. Most people see them as throwaways. Nobody wants to adopt problem kids like these.

Nobody, that is, except people like us.

This is our story—the story of how God inspired Possum Trot, Texas, to take on 72 of the toughest kids from the foster-care system and adopt them as their own. It's also the story of how God has used our little community of three hundred folks to spark the conscience of a nation.

Our kids didn't come to us as cute little Gerber babies. They came to us rough, right off the street, and right into our homes, where they lied to us, cheated us, and stole from us. They were—and still can be—masters of manipulation. It's how they learned

to survive. Our kids were abandoned by their mamas, left at home with nothing to eat. They had to sneak food from the store just to put something in their tummies. Some of our kids were beaten by drunk daddies. Some were raped. These are little children I'm talking about.

And that's where the heroes come in. You're going to meet some of them. These aren't television celebrities. These are real-life heroes. Take the Browns, for instance. Here's a grandmother and grandfather—with kids already grown—who decided to adopt *triplets! Two-year-old triplets!* You'll also meet Diann Sparks—a single working mom—who adopted two boys as her own. And the Lathans—Lord have mercy! Wait till you hear what happened to *them*. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

You might have heard parts of our story already. God blessed us with opportunities to appear on NBC *News*, ABC's *Good Morning America*, and CBS. My wife and I even got to be on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. You might've seen us written up in *Reader's Digest* or *People* or *Family Circle* or *Southern Living*.

It's quite a blessing. It's quite a story. It's the miracle of Possum Trot, Texas.

At the End of The Pavement



Welcome to Possum Trot, Texas! I'm guessing you're from a long ways away, because any place is a long ways from Possum Trot.

Take a look around you. You'll see well-kept, double-wide mobile homes with neatly mowed acres of grass, where kids laugh and run. And you'll see clapboard shacks sprawled out on bald knobs of dirt, where rusted-out pickup trucks serve as lawn ornaments.

Just up the road is Bennett Chapel, my church; I'm the pastor, W. C. Martin.

You may think of us as poor, maybe less educated than you. Deep in the shadow of your soul, you may even look down on us. But whatever you do, don't dismiss us or you'll miss the treasure.

It's the secret of how we overcame huge challenges to raise 72 adopted kids. Many adoptions end up in what social services calls "disillusionment." But here in Possum Trot, after more than 10 years and all these kids, not one child has been sent back to the system.

I challenge you to look beyond your first impressions, dig a little deeper, and discover the hidden wealth here, because this is someplace special, even though you might not recognize it . . . yet.

Our community is an important character in this story. It's part of our miracle. So, hop in the truck and strap on your seat-belt. As we say here in the South, you're "fixin' to" get a personal tour of Possum Trot, Texas.

First off, you'll notice there aren't any signs that say "Possum Trot." And you won't find it on most maps, either. It's like a lost treasure. We're in East Central Texas, about 10 miles from the border of Louisiana, right on the edge of the Sabine National Forest.

Some people in surrounding areas refer to Possum Trot as the place "back in the woods." Social workers had their doubts if the rough and tough kids from the foster system could make it in this tiny community. Could the people here really pull this off?

They weren't the only ones who doubted. I wish I could tell you that when my wife, Donna, first mentioned adoption, an unexplainable thrill went through my being . . . that I put my arms around her and told her we were in this new adventure together and I would support her in any way I could.



Actually, my exact words were, “Yeah, right!”

But I have to be honest. Adoption just didn’t make sense for us. I called myself a man of faith, but right then I had a lot of doubts. We already had two kids, 9-year-old LaDonna and our 15-year-old son, Princeton, who has been permanently brain-damaged since birth. It didn’t fit our family to adopt.

We were pastoring a church while I was working a full-time job in insurance and supervising the construction of a new church building. We were way too busy.

Donna was emotionally burdened—still recovering from a personal tragedy. The timing wasn’t right to adopt.

But God told us to adopt anyway. This decision wasn’t about our lifestyle or our schedule or our timing. Really, it wasn’t about us at all. This decision was about the children.

We didn’t realize it at the time, but Princeton was actually God’s preparation for us. He was born with brain damage after my wife went through 18 hours of intense labor. The doctors said Prince would never amount to anything more than a “vegetable,” and they advised us to make him a ward of the state. But Princeton was our *son*. We took him home with us.

Through Princeton, God taught us what patience and long-suffering were all about. We were sure God was going to heal him. We prayed so hard. He had seizures. He’d fall and bust his head. It was a hard sight—our son all bruised up like that.

But we wouldn’t give up.

See, God taught us not to give up on anything. So we refused

to quit. It was a full-time job just keeping up with the boy, but we stayed with him. We kept on praying.

When Princeton was about 7 years old, God healed him of the seizures! He still has brain damage, but he's also one of the musicians at the church, where he plays bass guitar. And now Princeton is the one who prays for others—all because we wouldn't give up.

See, God was training us for a ministry we couldn't envision quite yet. He was preparing us to take in kids who needed so much. Kids who were damaged through no fault of their own. Kids who needed lots of patience. Kids who needed lots of love.

Of course, when you go through tough times, you don't always see the full picture. At the time, adoption just didn't make sense at all. But God took us back to where I'm taking you now. It's a place of inspiration that God used to change our minds. And change our lives.

We'll take a right turn here on County Road 2625. You notice there aren't any paved roads in Possum Trot. Just red dirt and black gravel winding through green, piney woods. Deep in these very woods—off to the right a ways—is the little white four-room house where the miracle of Possum Trot really started.

Donna is already there to meet us. I want you to hear the story from her, because she tells it best. Folks around here call her “Sister Martin” or “First Lady.”

I met Donna when I was touring with my brothers—the Martin Brothers—singing all across the country. We stopped here

Small Town
Big Miracle



Donna Martin on her back porch

in Possum Trot for a concert at a little wooden church called Bennett Chapel. Little did I know I would pastor this same church some day. But something I did know right away: The young lady who walked in the door while I was singing was going to be my wife. I fell in love with her.

I believe you will too.

Here's Donna's story:

I can still see my mama sitting in her rocking chair there on our front porch. I can still hear her humming. I can still feel her arms around me as I sat quietly in her lap as a little girl, my head against her breast, listening.

In moments like those, lessons were inscribed on my heart—lessons that inspired me to one day adopt little ones who were strangers to love.

A small shack with a dirt-floor porch was home to 18 kids in all. No electricity. No running water. We had to wash our clothes in a Number 3 tin tub. We had an outhouse and a little pot inside we called the pee pot. We'd put pine oil in it and keep a lid on it.

Somehow, some way, Mama made that shack a home. Even with 18 kids, Mama never screamed at us, never cussed, never talked down to us. But you never crossed her either.

Of course, we didn't have any health insurance or money for a doctor. So when we were little and we'd get sick, we'd just look to Mama. Toothache, headache, mumps, whatever. I can remember one time when I was five or six years old, I got real sick. My head was hurting me so badly, I started to cry.

Mama picked me up and sat me in her lap. And she began to rock me in that rocking chair of hers and just started humming. Then she prayed. I closed my eyes. The tears streamed down my face. And in the quietness of that moment, there in Mama's arms, I was healed! The headache went away!

Mama's love brought us through the tough stuff. I learned that if anything will take you through, love will.

Mama took in strangers and fed them as well, because folks knew there was always food at her house. She treated the "take ins" as family. If they were about to get in trouble, they knew they could go talk to Mama. She wasn't just Mama at home. She was "Mama" to all of Possum Trot.

On February 12, 1996, right about two o'clock in the afternoon, I got a call from my brother Kerry. Mama was in the hospital. In the emergency room. A few minutes later, one of the people from the church called. "First Lady, you really need to go now. She's in cardiac arrest."

When I got to the hospital, my niece Rachel met me in the parking lot. But she never said a word. Once inside, I saw the emergency doors were shut. The curtains were closed. My auntie, Cora Williams, came out and hugged me. "Well," she said, "we just lost Murtha."

And I looked at her.

"Lost Mama?"

"Yes. Mother just passed away."

I turned. All I could do was run.

And scream.

This wasn't right. I was the First Lady of the church. It was my job to pray for people, encourage them, go to prayer meetings, help lead the worship service, visit the sick, be strong for others, give people hope. It was my job to hold things together. Now I was falling apart.

I pushed my feelings down deep and pushed on with life. But the feelings of pain were still there. For several months after Mama died, I was out in my yard every day planting flowers, lots of them. I set the most beautiful flower garden, alive with color, fresh with fragrance. It was my way of crowding out the ugly weeds of pain and emptiness that kept choking me.

One morning I was alone in the house. I stood in the kitchen washing dishes when that all-too-familiar dark shadow crossed over me again—a shadow of pain, anger, emptiness. I had had enough. “Okay, God,” I said. “Today is the day. I have complained to you, I’ve cried, I’ve ached, I’ve hurt . . .” I looked up through my kitchen ceiling, right into heaven, right into His heart. And I said, “God, You either heal me, or let me die.”

As soon as I spoke those words, I was moved to step out on my back porch. As I stood looking out over my back yard filled with flowers, I felt the Holy Spirit say something to me.

“I hear you.”

His words fed my spirit. “I’ve heard your pain, and I’ve heard your complaints. But I want you to take a moment and think about all those children out there who do not have what you had in a mother. I want you to give back to them. Foster and adopt.”

Immediately, a sense of healing came over me. I was overtaken by

Small Town
Big Miracle

the light, the warmth, and the presence of my God. The dark shadow fled as quickly as a fog when the morning sun splits through.

I didn't know a thing about adoption. But I went into the house and called the number I found in the phone book. I stood in the kitchen on the phone and spoke 11 words that changed my life.

"I'm Donna Martin, and I want to become a foster parent."

A Call to My Fellow Pastors

As we think about these stories, we might ask ourselves, *How can a human being do these awful things to a child?* But here's a question closer to home: *How can we close our eyes to a child like this?*

So, where is the church? God commanded us to look after the fatherless. Why don't we obey?

There's been more than enough talk. Since 1987, the number of children in foster care has nearly doubled. It's time to do something. If we don't, we're about to lose a generation of kids. I challenge you to join with me in saying, "Not on our watch!"

Father God called on His Son, Jesus, to give up glory and royalty—His "comfort zone"—to come down to a dark world to rescue us, to share His glory, to adopt us into His royal family. And now He's calling on us to step out of our world of convenience to rescue these kids. To save a generation.

He gave up His life to save us. Can we give up our comfort? No longer can we afford to sit around idly, waiting for state agencies or Congress or the president to solve the problem of 134,000 children who need adopting. This is *our* responsibility as a church.

It's time to stop talking about how bad these children are, and start reaching them with the transforming love of Jesus. The Devil loves to steal, kill, and destroy—and he especially enjoys stealing,

killing, and destroying children. They're defenseless. Easy marks if they don't have a mom or dad to pray protection over them.

He has bound thousands of children into a dark world of chaos, where adults slap them, sexually abuse them, and leave them abandoned, locked up in houses without even food to eat.

The church has an anointing, a power, and a mandate to make a difference in the world. It's our job to free these kids from captivity.

It's time for the church to stand up. To come out of its addiction to comfort. I challenge the church to take up the cause of these children. God has already done His part. It's our turn now.

It's time for the Enemy to realize that he's not going to win. It's time for the Enemy to tremble. It's time for the gates of hell around these children to fall. It's time for the church to prevail. It's time to rescue these children out of darkness and bondage and bring them into the light.

It's time to bring them home.

—Pastor W. C. Martin



Note: Check with local government adoption agencies. They'll be glad to come to talk to your church or church group at no charge, just as Child Protective Services came to Bennett Chapel. Look up your local department of social services, human services, or child welfare agency.

Appendix: *Help for Those Considering Adoption*

THE NUMBERS AND THE HOPE

There are approximately 134,000 children in the United States without a home.¹ These are kids who have been neglected, abandoned, and abused. Now they're languishing in a foster-care system, moving from house to house to house.

Nearly 82 million American adults have considered adopting a child. All it would take is one adult out of roughly every 500 people in that group to adopt, so that *all 134,000 children would be able to "come home" to a permanent family.*

AN OVERVIEW

There isn't a national standard for adopting children. It's different from state to state. A few things to know:

- You don't have to own your own home or have a certain salary to adopt.

1. All facts and statistics in this section are from the 2002 National Adoption Attitudes Survey, sponsored by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption and the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute.

- You don't have to be the same race as your adopted child.
- Agencies are looking for parents who will provide a safe, stable, and loving environment for the child.
- You can adopt through a public agency, a private agency, or arrange an "independent" adoption, using an intermediary, such as an attorney or physician. (Make sure you're confident in their ethics and their expertise in adoption laws—ask for references.)

15 STEPS TO ADOPT YOUR CHILD

1. Gather information.

If you're thinking about adoption, be aware that adoption can sometimes take awhile. It's somewhat like going through an obstacle course. But in the end, giving a child a home and raising him in a family that loves him can be one of the most fulfilling rewards you'll ever experience.

To get started, log on to www.family.org and type "adoption" in the search box for a list of excellent resources from Focus on the Family. Or contact the organization below:

Voice of the Orphan

Family Life

P.O. Box 7111

Little Rock, Arkansas 72223

Within the United States, call 1-800-FL-TODAY
(1-800-358-6329) 24 hours a day, or 1-877-FL-TODAY.
Outside the United States, call 501-223-8663.
www.voiceoftheorphan.org

2. Think it over. Pray it over.

Remember these kids don't need perfect parents, just committed parents—committed to love them, encourage them, and guide them. Some important qualities you'll need include:

- A love of children and parenting
- Patience and perseverance
- A good sense of humor
- The ability to love unconditionally

Some questions to ask yourself:

- Why am I adopting?
- Do my spouse and I work well as a team? Are we both committed to adopting?
- Does our lifestyle give us the time and resources we'll need to raise our child? (Note that financial assistance is available.)

3. Choose which kind of adoption.

Do you hope to adopt a newborn, or are you going to adopt a child from the foster-care system? Are you going to adopt within the United States, or will your child come from another country?

4. Check out financial assistance.

There is an amazing number of resources you can tap into for help with the finances of adopting. Although the cost varies depending on which kind of adoption you want, keep in mind that in many cases you can adopt a child at no cost.

If there is a cost, your employer may offer adoption benefits—many companies do. The military provides up to two thousand dollars per child when active-duty personnel adopt. There are also tax credits available to cover adoptions; adoption subsidies and grants are also available.

5. Choose an adoption agency.

You'll need to work with an agency in the state where you live. Contact several agencies to get a feel for which one would best suit your needs. Ask about their fees—including the fee for a home study (an in-house evaluation and orientation for prospective parents).

How do you find an agency?

- Contact the adoption specialist in your state for a list of local adoption agencies in your area.
- For private agencies, check the yellow pages under “Adoptions.”
- Ask local adoption-support groups for their recommendations.

6. Notify your agency that you want to investigate further.

Depending on the agency, you may have to answer screening questions over the phone, or you may receive some literature that maps out the adoption process. Most likely you'll be invited to an orientation session for parents thinking about adoption.

7. Fill out an adoption application.

It's a good idea to attend the orientation session first before you fill out an application, which often comes with a nonrefundable application fee. The orientation should give you a good overview of the agency and the process, to make sure you're comfortable with the agency you've chosen.

8. Go through a home study.

This required step gives your social worker a chance to get to know you as well as prepare you for the adoption. You'll learn more about what to expect. Your agency will brief you on what you'll need for the home study, including documents such as marriage certificates, birth certificates, and personal references.

9. Attend adoption classes.

Most agencies provide adoption classes. These classes are a very helpful way to learn more about adoption issues as well as meet other adoptive parents.

10. Search for your child.

Your agency will search for a child for you. Some agencies publish photo-listing books of children waiting for homes:

11. Learn about your child.

After you've identified a child you'd like to adopt, you'll want to learn as much as possible about him or her. Talk with the social agency. Ask the agency if you can talk with the foster parents so you can arrange a smooth transition for your child.

The agency will help you arrange visits to your home to see how things fit for you and your child.

12. Get ready for your child: paperwork and preparation.

Check your family insurance plan. You'll want to make sure your policy is updated. Check into getting a new social security number and the original birth certificate for your child. It can be much more difficult to obtain a birth certificate after the adoption.

Prepare your other children for the changes. Talk it over with them, and prepare them for the transition.

13. Welcome your child home!

When your new child comes to your home, you become the temporary legal custodian. The agency will monitor how things are going for everyone. This evaluation time may take anywhere from a few weeks to a year.

14. File a petition to adopt.

Once everything checks out, you'll go to court to initiate an adoption petition for your child. You may need an attorney to help you.

15. Finalize the adoption.

This is the last step—finalization hearings. These hearings are a judicial proceeding and usually come within 6 to 12 months after your child is placed in your home. Typically, a hearing is only 10 to 30 minutes. This is when you are given permanent legal custody of your adopted child.



Remember back to high school when you were ready to change the world for the better? You've just made a great start. *You're changing the world of a child for the better.*